
“Leadership takes on different meanings depending on the person who leads and the person being led. On any given day, leadership can mean teaching, coaching, assigning, cheerleading, counseling, guiding, correcting, protecting, explaining and observing.”¹

LEADERSHIP

Choosing to Lead

in Today's Police Environment

BY ROD SCHAEFFER

Law enforcement leaders are facing one of the most challenging times in modern-day policing. Agencies face increased pressure to reevaluate practices, policies and procedures while balancing an ever-changing cultural, social and technological landscape. Media and political influences continue to demand change and accountability while standing on the sidelines and critiquing every action and decision of leaders in charge.

Almost overnight, the norm in policing has changed and been deemed unacceptable due to the current conditions in our country and around the world. Police leaders today must be able to account for the rapidly changing environment, provide real-world solutions, and gain the trust of the public and that of the brave men and women who work for them.

At the same time, law enforcement agencies are facing personnel shortages like never before. Institutional knowledge continues to be lost on a regular basis as those with “the time on” have chosen to leave the profession at a blistering pace. Organizations across the country continue to have difficulty recruiting and retaining new officers in a profession that once saw a large number of applicants.

Those who remain on the job continue to see an increasing lack of support from their communities, either real or perceived. The media continues to push narratives that create undesirable environments for officers, both young and old. Existing leaders have left or are being pushed out, resulting in an overwhelming need for new leaders to step up and take the mantle of their organizations.

Law enforcement desperately needs new leaders who understand how to embrace modern-day policing while also motivating, supporting and mentoring their members and guiding them with confidence and courage through these emerging struggles.

Leaders in policing lead from the front, never pushing or managing from the rear. They demonstrate a willingness to take the lead and the ability to motivate those that follow.

Today, many current and aspiring law enforcement leaders seek greater insight into becoming effective police leaders and identifying what leadership style will best work in this rapidly changing environment. The reality is that there is no magic bullet. There doesn't exist a "best" leadership style. There is no "best fit" when it comes to leadership. The successful leader will learn to embrace all leadership styles and identify which one works best for a particular situation. Still, each chosen leadership style or approach shares certain principles.

To find the correct solution, we must ask, "What does it take to lead?" or "How do I become the best leader?" Leaders who others want to follow must strive for greatness. Greatness is a choice and a destination. The path one takes to arrive there and the trials one faces along the way define who we are as leaders. Greatness is a choice that all have a right to pursue as a goal. However, with that goal, sacrifices are made. It is easier and safer to flow with the mediocre.

To be great, one must show up and be willing to participate in the work, and decide to get the job done. To be mediocre is to hide on the sidelines and allow opportunities to pass you by as others make decisions. Mediocre leaders allow the agency to decide for them. They fail to take charge or say "follow me" to the men and women seeking leadership. Mediocre leaders settle and accept. They refuse to try, refuse to challenge, and ultimately, they fade away. Their potential to make a difference becomes stalled and forgotten along the way.

One of the most significant characteristics of a leader is their desire to be part of something bigger than themselves. Their ability to be that leader that other officers want and need them to be. Their ability to fill the role that is open in the moment. A willingness to attempt what others will not, and a passion and willingness to risk in order to win. Being a great leader is a process learned along a path full of peaks and valleys.

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Leaders are defined not so much by their words but by their actions and their willingness to be in the game. There are those who naturally gravitate to leadership roles. Others rise to the occasion. Many in this profession don't seek the spotlight but will step up to accomplish the mission. Situational leaders may not have been born that way, but they recognize a need and push forward and solve the problem. These informal leaders can sway the battle. They can influence and push an organization in directions never before thought possible if given a chance. Departmental leaders should recognize the abilities of these officers and challenge them with greater responsibilities and opportunities so that they may create positive change and impact within the organization.

Leaders in policing lead from the front, never pushing or managing from the rear. They demonstrate a willingness to take the lead and the ability to motivate those that follow. True leaders have officers who support and follow them because they have demonstrated the ability to take care of those same officers. Their officers trust them because they trust their officers. Mutual respect grows, and the leader pushes on. A leader sweats and bleeds alongside the officer, allowing the "manager" to stand back and measure results.

Principles of leadership can be taught and become cultural if the organization invests both time and energy. From day one, the military teaches the newest soldier the meaning of leadership and the cost associated with it. They focus on the mission, and each element of the mission is understood to be critical to its overall success. No part or person is inconsequential or unimportant. A leader ensures that each person recognizes that their contribution to the mission ensures success. No one thing is more important than the other in ensuring a positive outcome. Our soldiers, sailors and airmen know this simple truth. They are taught not only to be successful in their individual roles but also how to perform those beside and above them to ensure mission success. Their teamwork and precision are something we should attempt to model in policing.

Some of our strongest leadership positions are those found in our law enforcement teams. Every team has leaders, both formal and informal. Our strongest teams are comprised of officers who are willing to give the best of themselves and understand the need to lead, follow, or get out of the way.

A team may not necessarily be made of the "best" officers, but when placed together, they will represent the solution to a problem as members gain synergy from each other's strengths. The individual efforts of each team member creates the opportunity for the team's success as a whole. Leaders within the team can take the cumulative efforts of its members and create greatness. Formal team leaders directly impact the culture and direction of the team while allowing the informal leaders to work behind the scene and support the mission. This cooperative effort results in the greatness all of us strive to achieve. Additionally, it creates

an environment for young team members to learn from stronger, experienced leaders and, as a result, allows for leadership to be transferred and repeated for future generations. This culture of leadership development has a cumulative effect of repeating its self.

“What’s important now?” (WIN) is a quote made famous by legendary coach Lou Holtz. Police leaders should embrace this powerful phrase and focus on its meaning during the decision-making process. Ask what is most important to the task at hand. Once identified, a true leader will not shy away from the decision, even if it’s difficult. Each decision made may require a different approach; however, the WIN principle should still apply. WIN allows for the proper prioritization and allows for the police leader to be effective and efficient in the process.

Ultimately, leadership is a choice. It is a process learned through success and failure. Leadership is hard work and something that you must choose to be a part of each day. If you don’t step up and push through, you slow down, and ultimately your people stall out. Each of us has the ability to influence our piece of the organization. Leaders take time to give everyone a voice and make everyone a part of the solution. That’s not to say that everyone has a vote. That’s the scary part of leadership. The responsibility is on your

shoulders. You have to have the confidence and make the call, but the true leader has the team’s support in doing so based upon their past performance.

Support your team, drive your organization. Learn from mistakes, and above all, continue to strive for greatness.

ENDNOTE

1. 78 Important Questions Every Leader Should Ask and Answer, Chris Clarke-Epstein (2014)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rod Schaeffer is a law enforcement officer and training instructor with 30 years of law enforcement experience. He currently holds the rank of captain at the Lee’s Summit (MO) Police Department. He has extensive experience in planning, response, and recovery of a multitude of critical incidents. Schaeffer has served within various units and roles throughout his career. He currently serves as the captain over special operations and SWAT commander and incident commander. In addition to serving as a full-time police officer and lead trainer, he also serves as an instructor for the Heartland Tactical Officers Association and the National Tactical Officers Association.

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